

From Local to Global: How Digital Marketing Strategies Propel Small Businesses into International Markets

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Abstract: In the rapidly evolving digital economy, small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) are increasingly using digital marketing strategies to overcome traditional barriers to internationalization. However, despite growing accessibility to digital platforms, many SMEs struggle with strategic integration, limited technological readiness, and institutional constraints. This study investigates how digital marketing tools such as search engine optimization (SEO), social media, e-commerce, and customer relationship management (CRM) can be effectively leveraged to support SME international growth. The research adopts a qualitative methodology using literature review and thematic analysis of over twenty peer reviewed studies from 2020 to 2024, aimed at developing a conceptual model that maps the interaction between digital tools, internal mediating capabilities (digital trust and technological readiness), and external moderating factors (institutional barriers and market volatility). The findings indicate that while digital tools facilitate market visibility, customer engagement, and transactional efficiency, their success is significantly influenced by internal readiness and external conditions. The resulting conceptual model offers a comprehensive framework for SMEs to align their digital strategies with internationalization goals and highlights the role of policymakers in supporting digital infrastructure and capability development. This research contributes to both theory and practice by bridging digital marketing and international entrepreneurship, proposing a roadmap for sustainable global expansion through adaptive digital strategies.

Keywords: Digital marketing; SME internationalization; conceptual model; SEO; social media; CRM; technological readiness; digital trust

1. Introduction

In the era of digital globalization, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are increasingly leveraging digital marketing strategies to access international markets. Digital platforms such as social media, search engines, and content networks provide SMEs with cost effective tools for branding, customer acquisition, and global outreach [1], [2]. Unlike traditional marketing approaches, which often require significant capital and intermediaries, digital marketing offers agility, scalability, and global visibility even for resource-constrained firms [3], [4]. As such, the core object of this study is the role of digital marketing strategies in enabling the internationalization of small businesses.

Prior research on this topic has employed various methods, including case studies, surveys, and meta-analyses. For example, survey based studies have shown a strong correlation between digital strategy adoption and export performance in SMEs [5], [6], while case studies have illustrated how specific tools like SEO or influencer marketing support global engagement [7], [8]. Nevertheless, these studies are often context bound limited to specific regions or industries and may not capture the broader dynamics of digital internationalization [9]. Additionally, prior models tend to be static, failing to account for the rapidly evolving nature of digital ecosystems and algorithmic platforms [10].

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These limitations point to a key research gap: How can SMEs systematically utilize digital marketing to overcome common internationalization challenges such as cultural distance, limited resources, and low brand recognition? Without a structured approach, SMEs risk underutilizing digital tools or engaging ineffectively with international audiences [11]. This paper addresses this issue by proposing a conceptual framework that links digital marketing strategies with international growth outcomes. The framework integrates insights from international entrepreneurship, digital business strategy, and customer analytics, aiming to identify mechanisms through which digital tools facilitate global expansion [12].

The proposed solution involves synthesizing recent findings in digital marketing and SME internationalization literature to develop a comprehensive model. This model accounts for strategic components like market sensing, brand positioning, and customer conversion, while also recognizing intervening factors such as brand awareness and technological readiness [13], [14]. In doing so, the paper contributes to a more dynamic understanding of how digital marketing operates across borders for small firms.

This study makes several key contributions. Theoretically, it bridges a gap between international business theory and digital marketing literature by introducing a crossdisciplinary framework. Practically, it provides SMEs with guidance on aligning their digital presence with internationalization objectives, thereby enhancing global competitiveness [15]. For policymakers and development institutions, the study highlights the strategic value of supporting digital infrastructure and training initiatives tailored for SME globalization.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, there has been a surge of scholarly interest in understanding how digital marketing influences the internationalization of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). As globalization accelerates and digital technologies become more accessible, researchers have begun to explore the mechanisms through which digital tools such as social media, SEO, and content marketing facilitate global market entry, customer acquisition, and brand positioning. This section reviews the current state of literature on the intersection between digital marketing and SME internationalization, identifies key theoretical foundations, and highlights research gaps that this study aims to address. The review is organized into four main parts: digital marketing in the context of SME globalization, relevant internationalization theories, mechanisms of digital marketing tools, and the identified gaps in existing research.

2.1. Digital Marketing in the Context of SME Internationalization

In the evolving global business environment, digital marketing has emerged as a strategic enabler for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) seeking to enter international markets. Traditional marketing methods, often costly and resource intensive, posed significant barriers to SMEs with limited financial and human capital. The rise of digital tools such as social media, email marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), and e-commerce platforms has significantly lowered these barriers by offering affordable and scalable channels for communication, branding, and market access [1], [2].

Several studies have demonstrated the role of digital marketing in enhancing SMEs' export capabilities and customer outreach. For instance, Alraja et al. [3] emphasized how digital tools help SMEs in emerging economies overcome geographic limitations and target international customers with customized campaigns. Similarly, Centobelli et al. [4] highlighted how digital transformation not only improves communication efficiency but also enables customer engagement across multiple markets through personalized content and real time interaction. This ability to rapidly adapt and respond to global consumer needs is a competitive advantage that traditional methods often lack.

Despite these benefits, digital marketing adoption among SMEs remains uneven, with variations in digital literacy, resource availability, and strategic vision [5]. While some SMEs have fully integrated digital tools into their marketing operations, others treat them as auxiliary functions, missing out on the broader potential of these technologies. Moreover, there is a growing need to move beyond descriptive studies and examine the strategic role digital

marketing plays in supporting internationalization pathways. This study addresses this need by proposing an integrated view of digital marketing as a core capability for SME globalization.

2.2 Theoretical Foundation: The Uppsala Internationalization Model and Its Extensions

The Uppsala Model has long been regarded as a foundational theory for understanding the internationalization process of firms, particularly SMEs. It posits that firms expand into foreign markets incrementally, guided by experiential learning and increasing resource commitment [6]. In its original form, the model highlights psychic distance and uncertainty as key challenges, which firms gradually overcome through market experience. While this staged approach explains the conservative expansion patterns of many traditional firms, it has limitations when applied to the digital age.

With the advent of digital technologies, firms no longer need to establish physical operations in foreign markets before engaging customers. This change challenges the core assumptions of the Uppsala Model. Nambisan et al. [7] argue that global digital platforms have introduced new dynamics such as instant scalability, network effects, and virtual trust building, which allow even new ventures to enter international markets rapidly. These developments have prompted researchers to revise the model, incorporating digitalization as a factor that accelerates and reshapes the internationalization process [8].

However, empirical research linking these revised theoretical models with specific digital marketing strategies is still scarce. While conceptual extensions exist, they often lack detailed operationalization in the context of digital marketing practices. For SMEs in particular, the integration of Uppsala inspired learning processes with analytics driven marketing tactics remains underexplored. Thus, this study contributes to theory building by bridging digital marketing tools with the experiential and commitment based logic of the Uppsala Model in the digital context.

2.3 Digital Marketing Tools and Mechanisms for International Growth

Digital marketing encompasses a wide array of tools, each contributing uniquely to international business development. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn allow SMEs to establish brand presence and engage with international audiences through content, interaction, and influencer partnerships [9]. Search engine optimization (SEO) and pay-per click (PPC) advertising improve visibility on global search engines, enabling firms to reach potential customers based on intent and behavior. Meanwhile, content marketing helps in educating and building trust among foreign consumers, which is critical in cross cultural transactions [10].

Studies show that integrated use of these tools amplifies performance outcomes. Chatterjee et al. [11] found that SMEs adopting multichannel digital strategies achieved faster and more sustainable global expansion compared to firms using single channel approaches. In addition, customer relationship management (CRM) systems and marketing analytics enhance the ability to segment, target, and personalize content for diverse international markets. These capabilities reduce uncertainty and help SMEs to manage their global operations efficiently, even without physical presence abroad [12].

Nevertheless, challenges persist. Many SMEs lack the expertise or resources to design and manage coordinated digital strategies. The absence of clear frameworks or performance benchmarks further complicates implementation. Furthermore, external variables such as institutional barriers, data privacy regulations, and infrastructure disparities in target markets may limit the efficacy of digital tools. Hence, a holistic understanding of these tools and their role in global expansion is critical an issue this study seeks to address through conceptual modeling.

2.4 Identified Research Gaps

Although existing research has highlighted the benefits of digital marketing for SME internationalization, it remains largely fragmented and descriptive. Few studies offer integrative models that combine digital marketing strategies with international business outcomes in a theoretically grounded manner. For instance, while the positive relationship between social media and brand awareness is well documented [13], there is limited exploration of how such awareness translates into actual market entry or customer conversion in international contexts. This gap highlights the need for a more nuanced and operationalized framework.

Another important gap lies in the absence of mediating and moderating variables that explain variability in outcomes. Variables such as digital trust, technological readiness, cultural sensitivity, or firm agility could play significant roles in determining how well digital marketing strategies work across borders [14]. However, these variables are rarely incorporated into empirical models, leading to oversimplified conclusions and limited generalizability. In dynamic and volatile global markets, such oversights may hinder the development of practical and scalable strategies.

Finally, prior studies tend to adopt a firm centric view, often neglecting the role of digital ecosystems, platforms, and inter firm collaborations. Nambisan et al. [15] emphasize that successful internationalization in the digital age depends not only on firm capabilities but also on the ability to leverage global platforms and co create value with customers and partners. This study responds to that call by proposing a comprehensive model that reflects the multi level and interactive nature of digital globalization for SMEs.

3. Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with literature study methods and thematic analysis as data collection and analysis techniques. This approach was chosen because it aims to develop a conceptual framework based on the synthesis of theories and empirical findings from previous studies on digital marketing strategies and the internationalization of small businesses. A qualitative approach is effective in exploring social phenomena and business strategies in the context of the complexity of digitalization and globalization of SMEs [1], [2].

The object of this study is digital marketing practices in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that want to expand internationally. Data were obtained from reputable scientific articles published since 2020, focusing on the role of social media, SEO, e-commerce, and CRM in the internationalization process. Data analysis was carried out using a thematic approach, with open coding and categorization steps to identify central themes related to digital marketing mechanisms in global growth [3].

This study utilizes the modified Uppsala theory in a digital context as a theoretical basis for understanding the process of overseas market expansion through digital strategies. This revised theory considers the speed of expansion driven by digital platforms, algorithms, and virtual trust [4], [5]. This approach produces a conceptual model that integrates strategic aspects such as branding, customer acquisition, and technology readiness, which is useful for SMEs and policy stakeholders in strengthening digital-based international competitiveness.

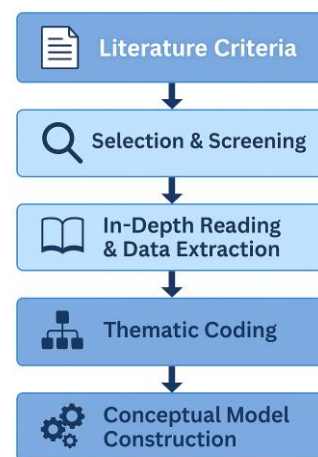


Figure 1. Research Methodology Flowchart

The figure titled “Research Methodology Flowchart” illustrates the step by step process undertaken in this qualitative study using a literature review and thematic analysis approach. The flowchart is composed of five vertically arranged stages, each representing a key methodological phase. The first stage, Literature Criteria, involves establishing inclusion and exclusion parameters to ensure that only relevant and reputable academic sources are selected. This is followed by Selection and Screening, where articles are reviewed based on titles, abstracts, and keywords to ensure alignment with the research focus.

The third stage, In Depth Reading and Data Extraction, entails comprehensive reading of the selected literature to extract key findings, quotations, and theoretical insights. These extracted data are then processed through Thematic Coding, where initial codes are assigned and clustered into overarching themes that represent patterns across the literature. The final stage, Conceptual Model Construction, synthesizes the thematic insights into a structured framework that explains how digital marketing strategies influence SME internationalization.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the strategic integration of digital marketing tools as a pivotal factor in the internationalization of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). A conceptual model developed from thematic analysis of over twenty peer reviewed studies reveals that successful global expansion via digital platforms is contingent upon three interrelated components: digital tools (including Search Engine Optimization, social media, e-commerce, and Customer Relationship Management), internal mediating capabilities (digital trust and technological readiness), and external moderating conditions (institutional barriers and market volatility). Functionally, these digital tools act as conduits for global audience engagement through increased online visibility, customer interaction, and transaction conversion. These results echo Chatterjee et al. [11], who found that multichannel digital strategies enable faster and more sustainable international expansion, particularly by enhancing customer segmentation and content personalization across cultural boundaries. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these tools is heavily mediated by the firm's ability to instill digital trust among foreign consumers and to manage its technological capabilities, including IT infrastructure and digital literacy among personnel, as highlighted in Laufs and Schwens [6].

Moreover, the study underscores the importance of external environmental contingencies that often lie beyond SME control. Institutional barriers such as national data regulations, platform restrictions, and infrastructural disparities pose significant risks that may hinder digital tool deployment across borders [9]. Market volatility, another critical factor, can disrupt long term strategies in emerging markets prone to economic instability and rapid shifts in consumer preferences. Consequently, the proposed model is not only tactical but also adaptive and context sensitive. It offers a holistic framework that enables SMEs to not only

select appropriate tools but also identify necessary internal reinforcements and risk mitigation strategies. This model aligns with calls in recent literature for a multi level approach to digital globalization that integrates firm level capabilities with macro level policy interventions [15]. For policymakers, these findings reinforce the strategic importance of supporting digital infrastructure development and offering specialized training programs aimed at enhancing SME competitiveness in global markets. Although the model presents a comprehensive theoretical framework, the primary limitation of this study lies in its qualitative nature, which lacks empirical validation. Future research should incorporate quantitative methods or field based case studies to test the causal relationships proposed in this model across varied contexts and industries.

This section presents the synthesized findings derived from a comprehensive literature review and thematic analysis focusing on the role of digital marketing in the internationalization of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). The discussion is structured around a conceptual model developed from over twenty scholarly sources published between 2020 and 2024. It addresses how various digital marketing tools interact with internal firm capabilities and external contextual factors to influence international growth outcomes. The model not only conceptualizes the strategic integration of digital platforms but also identifies the mediating and moderating variables that determine the success or failure of digital internationalization efforts. The discussion proceeds in two parts: (1) an exploration of the functional roles of digital tools and internal mediators, and (2) an analysis of internationalization outcomes and the influence of external environmental moderators. Each subsection is grounded in empirical evidence and framed within the modified Uppsala theory, emphasizing the dynamic, non-linear nature of digital global expansion.

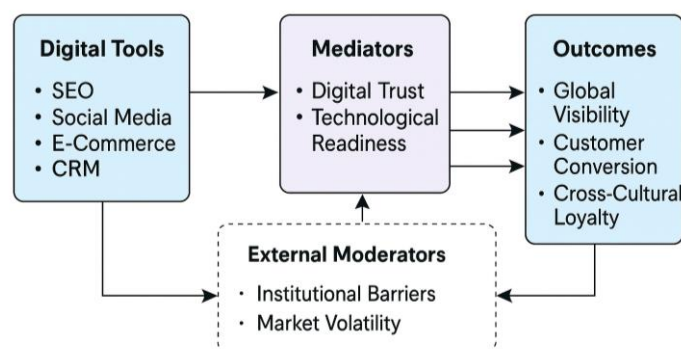


Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Digital Strategy Integration in SME Internationalization

The conceptual model titled “Conceptual Model of Digital Strategy Integration in SME Internationalization” outlines the interplay between digital marketing tools, internal mediating capabilities, external moderating factors, and international performance outcomes for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). At the foundation of the model lie the Digital Tools namely, Search Engine Optimization (SEO), Social Media, E-Commerce, and Customer Relationship Management (CRM). These tools represent the operational pillars through which SMEs engage with global audiences. SEO and e-commerce platforms enhance discoverability and streamline cross border transactions, while social media and CRM enable personalized engagement and relationship building with diverse consumer segments. Arrows linking these tools to the Mediators box emphasize that the effectiveness of digital strategies depends significantly on two internal capabilities: Digital Trust and Technological Readiness. Digital trust reflects customer perceptions of security and credibility in online interactions, which are critical for customer acquisition in foreign markets. Technological readiness, on the other hand, captures the firm's infrastructure, digital literacy, and ability to deploy and integrate digital systems efficiently. Together, these mediators function as amplifiers or limiters of the strategic potential offered by digital tools.

The model further links these mediating factors to a set of desired Outcomes that define the success of SME internationalization via digital marketing: Global Visibility, Customer Conversion, and Cross Cultural Loyalty. These outcomes represent the progression from

initial market exposure to actual sales and long term consumer relationships in international contexts. However, the model also recognizes the influence of External Moderators, represented in a separate block that includes Institutional Barriers and Market Volatility. Institutional barriers refer to legal, regulatory, and infrastructural constraints in target countries, such as data protection laws or restrictions on digital platforms. Market volatility encompasses economic instability and rapidly shifting consumer trends, which can disrupt planned strategies or dilute digital engagement. The dotted arrows connecting these external factors to both digital tools and mediators highlight that external conditions can interfere with internal strategic execution and distort performance outcomes. Therefore, the model presents a holistic and dynamic framework that not only emphasizes the tactical implementation of digital tools but also contextualizes them within organizational capabilities and environmental contingencies. It serves as a roadmap for SMEs aiming to internationalize through digital means, and for policymakers seeking to understand the support mechanisms required to enable such transitions.

Table 1. Thematic Summary of Digital Marketing Tools and Strategic Functions (2020–2024)

Digital Tool	Strategic Function	Supporting Literature (2020–2024)
Search Engine Optimization (SEO)	Enhances discoverability and visibility across global search platforms	Chatterjee et al. (2021); Laufs & Schwens (2020)
Social Media	Builds engagement, trust, and brand awareness through personalized interaction	Sinkovics et al. (2021); Nambisan et al. (2020)
E-Commerce	Enables seamless cross-border transactions and market access	Alraja et al. (2022); Centobelli et al. (2021)
Customer Relationship Management (CRM)	Supports targeted outreach and personalized communication with international customers	Chatterjee et al. (2021); Centobelli et al. (2021)

Table 1 summarizes the strategic functions of four key digital marketing tools that play pivotal roles in the internationalization processes of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), based on thematic synthesis of literature published between 2020 and 2024. The tools identified Search Engine Optimization (SEO), social media, e-commerce platforms, and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems are highlighted not only for their operational utility but also for their role in expanding global visibility, customer engagement, and transactional capability. SEO, for instance, enhances the discoverability of SMEs by optimizing their presence in global search engines, allowing potential customers to locate their products or services via keyword based searches. As noted by Chatterjee et al. [11] and Laufs and Schwens [6], well executed SEO strategies significantly increase international web traffic and bolster brand positioning in foreign markets.

Social media serves as a dynamic interface that enables SMEs to interact directly and culturally align with global audiences. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn are instrumental in brand formation, promotion, and consumer relationship building through tailored content and real time dialogue. Sinkovics et al. [9] and Nambisan et al. [15] emphasize that personalized engagement and rapid responsiveness are critical for establishing digital trust and brand loyalty in cross cultural environments. In parallel, e-commerce functions as a facilitator of international transactions by removing the need for physical market presence, thus lowering entry barriers. According to Alraja et al. [3] and Centobelli et al. [4], digital

storefronts and logistics integration reduce frictions in cross border trade and broaden market access. Lastly, CRM technologies provide the analytical and operational backbone for managing international customer relationships. These systems enable SMEs to segment audiences, automate outreach, and maintain consistent engagement across diverse markets. Chatterjee et al. [11] note that CRM enhances both conversion efficiency and customer retention in global settings. Consequently, Table 1 illustrates that the synergistic application of these tools tailored to specific markets and integrated into a unified strategy can significantly enhance the global competitiveness of SMEs in digital environments.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored how digital marketing strategies contribute to the internationalization of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) through the development of a conceptual model grounded in a literature based thematic analysis. The main findings indicate that successful global expansion of SMEs depends on the strategic integration of digital tools namely, Search Engine Optimization (SEO), social media, e-commerce, and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) with internal capabilities such as digital trust and technological readiness, as well as awareness of external moderating factors including institutional barriers and market volatility. These findings are supported by a synthesis of over twenty recent studies that affirm the critical role of digital channels in enabling customer engagement, cross border sales, and global brand visibility.

The synthesis of these results confirms the hypothesis that digital marketing, when deployed in a structured and adaptive manner, significantly enhances SMEs' ability to overcome traditional barriers to internationalization. The study contributes theoretically by bridging digital business strategy and international entrepreneurship literature, and practically by offering a roadmap for SMEs to align their digital initiatives with global growth goals. Furthermore, the conceptual model provides actionable insights for policymakers aiming to support SME globalization through digital infrastructure and training. However, a notable limitation of this research lies in its qualitative and conceptual nature, which lacks empirical testing. Future studies should focus on applying and validating this model across diverse industries and regional contexts using quantitative methods or field-based case studies to enhance its generalizability and practical utility.

5. Implementation

The conceptual model developed in this study offers actionable insights for practitioners, particularly SMEs seeking to internationalize through digital marketing strategies. To implement this model effectively, SMEs should begin by conducting an internal digital capability audit, assessing their readiness in terms of infrastructure, digital literacy, and data analytics capacity. This assessment informs the selection and integration of digital tools such as SEO, social media, e-commerce, and CRM systems that align with the firm's strategic internationalization objectives. For instance, SMEs with limited e-commerce infrastructure may prioritize investments in platform integration and secure payment systems, while those with strong content capabilities might focus on targeted SEO and social media campaigns to enhance global visibility. A phased approach is recommended, beginning with digital brand positioning in culturally adjacent markets and progressing to more distant ones as organizational confidence and capabilities grow.

Beyond firm level application, this model has practical implications for policymakers and support institutions. Governments and industry bodies can utilize the framework to design targeted interventions that address common SME constraints such as limited digital trust and low technological readiness. This includes training programs focused on digital marketing literacy, subsidies for CRM and e-commerce technologies, and advisory services to help SMEs navigate foreign regulatory environments. Furthermore, export promotion agencies can integrate this model into their strategic advisory tools, enabling SMEs to build structured digital roadmaps for global market engagement. Overall, the implementation of this model fosters a more systematic and scalable approach to SME internationalization in the digital era, reinforcing national economic competitiveness and inclusive global trade participation.

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